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RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHBW #0600/01 1691637
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 171637Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0071
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000600

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SR](#)
SUBJECT: SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH - TIME TO DEFINE ITS FUTURE?

REFS: A) 07 BELGRADE 1560, B) BELGRADE 299, C) 07 BELGRADE 1742

Summary

1. (SBU) The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is going through a turbulent period. The recent session of the Holy Assembly of Bishops revealed the divide within the church on a range of religious and political issues. With a technical authority taking over the functions of the Patriarch, none of the fundamental church reform and religious issues on the session agenda could have been resolved. The selection, after Patriarch Pavle's death, of a new patriarch will show whether the church is able to modernize. End summary.

Church to Be Run by "Technical Authority"

2. (SBU) The Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church held its annual session from May 14-21. Tensions over the "succession issue" forced by Patriarch Pavle's illness (Ref A) and the Serbian political situation dominated the opening of the session. First on the agenda was the issue of how to deal with the Patriarch's incapacitation since November due to illness. On May 17, after a heated, two-day discussion, the Holy Synod took over "...all the power, duties and functions" of the Patriarch due to his inability to perform these. Mirko Djordjevic, a sociologist focusing on religion, told us on May 28 that such a decision was without a precedent and amounted to "an attempt to depose the Patriarch."

Competitors for the Patriarch's Throne

3. (U) Public speculation about likely successors to Patriarch Pavle has been rife. The Church has unsurprisingly been silent on the issue. Media and analysts have put forward several names, among which the most often mentioned is that of Amfilohije (Ref B) -- Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Coastlands -- who currently presides over the Holy Synod and technically "runs" the church. Bishop Irinej of Backa and Bishop Nikolaj of Dabar and Bosnia are also mentioned.

4. (U) Those familiar with the situation in the SOC argue that the ultimate struggle for the throne will be between the reformist and conservative wings of the church. The reformist side includes Bishops Jovan of Sumadija, Vasilije of Srem, Irinej of Backa, Lavrentije of Sabac, and bishops from the diaspora. The conservative wing is headed by Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren, with strong support from the "Bosnian lobby," including Nikolaj of Dabar. Outside the SOC, the Bosnian lobby is perceived as extremely conservative and tainted by its role in the Bosnian conflict in the 1990's.

5. (SBU) Mirko Djordjevic said the current conflict within the church was the biggest one in its history. Conservatives and reformists were in dispute over both religious issues (liturgy, re-organization of Dioceses, etc.) and secular politics. The new patriarch to succeed Pavle would play a decisive role in eventual

modernization of the church, Djordjevic said.

Prospects for SOC with a New Government

¶6. (SBU) With the expected departure from office of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica (DSS), the SOC's most ardent backer, observers expect the SOC to lose much of the state support it had enjoyed over the past few years. None of the political groupings likely to form the new government - the DS-led "For a European Serbia" coalition, the SPS coalition, and the minority parties -- appear to have genuine ties to the church. Religion professor Milan Vukomanovic told us on June 5 that much of the ideological bond between the church and the state during the populists' reign in the Religion Ministry will be lost. The Ministry drafted and pushed forward for adoption of heavily criticized religious law and passed a number of related decisions which favored the SOC. Vukomanovic believes the soft influence that the SOC has exercised by controlling the religion curriculum in the state educational system would fade away once a party other than DSS runs the Education Ministry. "The symphony of state and Church is going to end," he concluded.

¶7. (U) Additional repercussions for the church might come if the new government amends the current Law on Churches and Religious Communities (Ref C). Civil society and other religious communities have criticized the law, which distinguishes between seven "traditional" communities and all other religious communities, as a political attempt by DSS to secure prima inter pares status for the SOC. Both "non-traditional" communities and NOs likely will continue to exert pressure on the new government to amend the law and diminish the SOC's privileged status.

Comment

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¶8. (SBU) The situation in the Serbian Orthodox Church reflects the general atmosphere of the Serbian state and society. For most of its history, the SOC had either an antagonistic or harmonious relationship with the state. With the "symphony" of the SOC and state likely to end under a new, pro-European government, the Church needs to find a new modus operandi to establish its proper role in society and politics. The SOC has a tremendous reserve of trust within Serbian society--its future role could be a positive force for change, or it could squander its position with ordinary citizens. The selection of the new Patriarch will show whether the Church is capable of answering these demands or if it is likely to become a less relevant social institution.

PEDERSON